

Misrepresenting Louisiana: Endorsing the Wrong Curriculum

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Abstract

In 2007, the National Council for the Social Studies was asked to endorse a curriculum for K-16 members that aligned with the controversial film, When the Levees Broke. It is argued that a different film, Hurricane on the Bayou is a better representation of the geography and culture of Louisiana and it should have been distributed to 22,000 members to help educate others about wetlands and their destruction.

Key Words: Louisiana, Spike Lee, National Council for the Social Studies, Geography, Wetlands, Curriculum

1. The formation and destruction of Katrina

In August of 2005 a tropical depression developed in the western Atlantic Ocean into one the strongest and costliest storms in United States history. Hurricane Katrina became a Category 1 hurricane on August 23 as it crossed southern Florida and entered the Gulf of Mexico. Residents along the Gulf Coast are used to the threat of a hurricane, but on Monday August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina, classified as a Category 3 storm, made landfall along southeast Louisiana and Mississippi.

Katrina made landfall with winds between 111 to 130 mph and a storm surge that accompanied these high winds. This storm surge caused severe damage in both Louisiana and Mississippi. Boats and cars along the Mississippi coast were pushed with the storm surge 6 to 12 miles inland. The storm surge also pushed against the levee system that was built to protect New Orleans. The failure of the levee system around New Orleans led to massive flooding, over 40 billion dollars worth of damage and over 1,800 deaths. As a result of Katrina over 1 million gulf coast residents were displaced, many of which were residents of New Orleans that evacuated across the United States.

2. The National Council for the Social Studies

Founded in 1921, the National Council for the Social Studies is an umbrella organization for elementary, middle, high school and college/university teachers who teach and are interested in the subjects that compose social studies. These subjects include anthropology, economics, geography, history, law-related education political science, psychology, and sociology. Over the years NCSS has grown to an organization with over 23,000 members. To help run the organization, NCSS has an executive director, central office staff and a board of directors, which is led by a president. The membership of NCSS elects the president, president elect and vice president. Additionally, members have individuals that represent the various grade levels on the board of directors. This includes two members to represent elementary teachers, two members to represent middle school teachers, three to represent high school teachers and two for the college/university level. One member is elected at large.

These ten members compile the NCSS Board of Directors along with the four members of the NCSS Executive Board, which is composed of the president, president-elect, vice-president and past president. Each member of the board is elected to a three-year term and they meet three times a year. During these meetings the budget, the yearly conference and endorsements and collaborations are discussed and voted upon. The author was elected in the spring of 2005 to represent the College/University membership. During the spring 2007 board meeting, the members were asked to discuss and vote on a number of projects that had been submitted for endorsement by the National Council for the Social Studies.

3. Endorsing Teaching the Levees

NCSS is approached approximately 10 to 15 times a year to endorse or become a partner on various projects that might interest social studies teachers. The endorsement process is lengthy and time consuming and requires a NCSS staff member to aid in this process. This staff member then presents only the projects or curriculum that have been vetted and deemed worthy of an endorsement. Once a project or curriculum has made it through this process it is presented to the Board of Directors for an 'up or down' vote.

On the agenda for the spring 2007 Board of Directors meeting was the request to endorse and distribute the educational curriculum *Teaching the Levees*. The authors of this curriculum, which is based upon Spike Lee's HBO series *When the Levees Broke*, created a 112-page resource that could be used with Lee's movie. Each member of the NCSS Board of Directors received this curriculum and a DVD copy of the Lee's film. When the time came for the discussion and vote on the motion to endorse the curriculum *Teaching the Levees* and Lee's film, each member had a chance to state their case either for or against the endorsement. When the time came for the author to make his point about this endorsement, he passionately argued against the National Council for the Social Studies embracing this curriculum and film. The film is inappropriate for high school students because of the graphic images that Lee utilizes of post Katrina New Orleans and the language used by individuals that were interviewed for the film. The author further argued that Lee's film, while earning honors for best mini series, was not the best way to represent Louisiana, New Orleans or Hurricane Katrina, and that if the Board of Directors were going to endorse a film, that it reconsider and look at other films. By a vote of ten to six in favor of endorsing the film, the Board of Directors of the National Council for the Social Studies approved the distribution of the film and a study guide to members of the organization.

The *Teaching the Levees* curriculum guide and a copy of Lee's film were distributed to over 22,000 members of the National Council for the Social Studies at the expense of Teacher's College, Columbia University and to advance the careers of those that produced it. A survey of the distribution and use of the curriculum by *EdLab* at Teacher's College, Columbia University found that the curriculum was distributed to teachers in all fifty states and to over 28,000 educators. Of those educators to whom the curriculum and film were distributed, 500 were randomly surveyed about the use of these texts in the classroom. Of those who responded, over 60% were high school teachers followed by college or university faculty. Interestingly, of those surveyed, 46% stated they did not use the curriculum and film in their classroom for various reasons. Of the 54% that did use the curriculum and film, the majority identified its use in a social studies classroom to teach about civics/government, economics, geography and history.

4. A Tale of Two Films used in Geography

To teach World Geography or Louisiana Geography, there are many resources and curriculums to help a classroom teacher with various concepts within geography. While there are many educational videos, such as National Geographic's *Forces of Nature*, that deal with physical or human geography, two films serve as the foundation for this paper: Greg MacGillivray's *Hurricane on the Bayou* and Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke*. While both films deal with Hurricane Katrina and the devastation that it caused, only one film would be appropriate to show in a World Geography or a Louisiana History class.

4.1 When the Levees Broke

Controversial filmmaker Spike Lee produced a four-part documentary about Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans in 2006. Lasting about four hours, this "requiem," lasting about four hours discusses the human and cultural impact of Hurricane Katrina. During these four hours, Lee paints a controversial picture of Louisiana and the response to destruction. Only after 200 minutes does Lee go into the geographic factors that influenced Hurricane Katrina and the destruction.

Through the four acts, Lee paints a picture of New Orleans and its residents. Through the use of interviews of residents, leaders and media members, Lee takes the viewer through the development of the storm, the call for evacuations by the Mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin and then the thousands of residents who took refuge at the Superdome. Once the storm passed, Lee interviews several residents about a 'boom' that they had heard during the storm. Some of these residents claim that the 'boom' was actually "a bomb going off to blow up the levees." Lee then interviews a historian who states that the 'rumor' of the levees being 'blown-up' has been around since the 1920s, when the levees in and around New Orleans were destroyed and flooded St. Bernard Parish, which affected over 1 million people. The majority of those affected in 1927 were white residents of St. Bernard Parish. Lee turns his attention to the rising water within New Orleans as a result of the levees failing. In his human-interest story, which is compelling, he shows the thousands of residents in the Superdome and within the city. These residents refused to leave and caught the world's attention during the flooding. As one of the people Lee interviews states, "I rode out Hurricane Betsy and I will be okay." This belief is repeated over and over again, as is the explanation given by many of the residents that they could not leave or as in some cases had no way to evacuate. The Superdome and New Orleans convention center were both opened as a last resort for residents that did not follow the mandatory evacuation order.

While Lee personally does not state the causes of the levees breaking or the consequences, he does go through the response and aftermath of the levees breaking. Lee shows people needing rescuing, to the lack of water and food at the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center, to the Army being called in to help with evacuations. Through the images that are selected and those not selected, Lee paints the picture of a slow response to the crisis from the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana and the Federal government. Lee then changes the direction of the film by focusing on the evacuees being relocated across the United States. In human geography terms this is referred to as diaspora, but Lee focuses on the idea and word that the evacuees were ‘refugees.’

In Act IV, Lee turns the film’s attention to the construction and failure of the levee system around New Orleans. Only after twenty minutes into the final hour does Lee change his focus onto the geographical features of Louisiana that would have lessened the destruction of Hurricane Katrina – wetlands, their destruction due to natural gas and oil exploration and the natural depositing of silt by the annual flooding of the Mississippi River. Instead of focusing on the issue of wetlands destruction Lee turns the camera lens to the story of natural gas and oil production in the Gulf of Mexico. He attempts to refocus the viewer’s attention by discussing how the Dutch use the levee system and other man made defenses to protect the Netherlands. In a last ditch effort to hammer home the human aspect of Hurricane Katrina, Lee focuses on the issue of FEMA trailers and insurance problems. The film ends with a traditional Jazz funeral march with the casket marked “Katrina.”

When the Levees Broke focuses on the human aspect of Hurricane Katrina and the aftermath to the city of New Orleans. Lee purposely focuses on the suffering of those of New Orleans and selectively paints the picture of how the storm was handled at the local, state and federal levels. Utilizing personal interviews, throughout this film, the anger of the residents is revealed with the language spoken. Lee also decided to show the images of those that had passed away as a result of the storm and its aftermath. As a filmmaker, Lee has this right. However, I argue that this film and curriculum are inappropriate to teach about Louisiana, coastal erosion or wetlands issues. Lee ignores any discussion of the geographic issues important to understand what really happened during Hurricane Katrina and chooses to focus on the human element which is not of particular importance when teaching coastal erosion and wetland issues.

4.2 Hurricane *on the Bayou*

Greg MacGillivray wrote and produced *Hurricane on the Bayou* and released the film in 2006 just as Lee released *When the Levees Broke*. Unlike Lee who started his film after Hurricane Katrina hit, MacGillivray actually started his film in 2004 and it was about to be edited when Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf shore. As MacGillivray clearly states, his film is about the wetlands of Louisiana and their destruction. Supported by the Weather Channel and the Audubon Nature Institute, MacGillivray’s aim was to bring the attention to the destruction of Louisiana’s wetlands through the largest film size possible – IMAX.

While MacGillivray’s aim was to educate viewers about Louisiana’s wetlands, he also produced his movie for profit and put an entertainment spin to the film. Like Lee who concentrates on the human aspect of Katrina, MacGillivray concentrates on the mega fauna of south Louisiana – alligators. While concentrating on alligators, MacGillivray weaved a story of south Louisiana culture by following two Louisianans Tab Benoit, a Cajun Blues guitarist and wetlands preservationist and inspiring violinist Amanda Shaw. Through this weaving of mega fauna and cultural heritage, MacGillivray presented a clearer picture of the geography of south Louisiana.

Three hundred years ago, prior to manmade levees, the Mississippi River would annually overflow its banks and deposit silt in the marshes of south Louisiana. As this fact is being told, MacGillivray flies the viewer over the vast wetlands of south Louisiana in an awe inspiring view. MacGillivray draws the viewer in with this and then followed it up with a gut check. Meryl Streep the narrator of *Hurricane on the Bayou*, tells the viewers that in the past 300 years over 1,000 square miles of wetlands have disappeared. To have this point hammered home, MacGillivray has Benoit describe how when he was a child the coast used to be ten miles further away than it currently was and had Shaw do a research project showing the change in coastal Louisiana through the use of maps for a science fair project.

As the viewer is drawn into the changing landscape of south Louisiana through the maps that Shaw used for her assignment, the focus shifted to the building of levees. Streep described the construction of levees in the 1930s to protect farmlands and how these same levees also starve the wetlands of their yearly renewal of silt by floods. This silt is being washed down the Mississippi River and deposited into the Gulf of Mexico. From here, the viewer is taken on a history lesson of natural gas and oil exploration in Louisiana.

The digging of canals in the wetlands introduced salt water that killed the roots of trees and plants that naturally were protected by the fresh water. Shifting gears, MacGillivray focused on hurricane development and how three miles of wetlands decrease storm surge by one foot. Wetlands, the viewer is told, are Louisiana's natural defense to hurricanes. Having 90% of the film completed prior to August 29, 2005, MacGillivray scrambled to discuss Hurricane Katrina and its formation. Here, the film changed focus and animation is used to show the destruction of the Superdome and other buildings in New Orleans. While this is childish and adds to the appeal of the film to younger viewers, a Hurricane Katrina fact is discussed. The Gulf of Mexico has a current and when Katrina entered the Gulf of Mexico in August of 2005, this Loop Current was two degrees warmer than normal and provided the fuel that Katrina needed to strengthen as she traveled across the Gulf of Mexico toward Louisiana and Mississippi.

MacGillivray had to rent a helicopter from Miami to be able to film the flooding of New Orleans after the levees broke. As MacGillivray explained in the extended portion of the film, his camera crew could not take wide shots of the city because the sky was full of other helicopters. The crew lamented the fact they did not have the equipment to help rescue those that were trapped in the rising water, but that the Coast Guard was doing 16 hour shifts to save as many people as possible. Shifting away from the damage to New Orleans, MacGillivray mounted his camera on a plane to view the wetlands after Katrina passed. Streep told the viewer that one hundred square miles of coastland was lost because of the storm and that mangrove plants and stone walls are being used to rebuild the wetlands. As a wetlands preservationist or activist, Benoit pleads that the wetlands be restored through controlled flooding and pumping of sludge into various areas in south Louisiana.

MacGillivray's aim was to educate the public about the wetlands of Louisiana and the impact of what a hurricane would have on them. In a sad twist of fate, Hurricane Katrina would allow MacGillivray to hammer the issue of wetland loss home. While hooking the viewer with the mega fauna – the alligator at the beginning, MacGillivray returned the alligator mother who prior to Katrina had several babies around her. However after the storm, only one baby survived. This is fact of nature as the alligator as a species will survive.

5. Advancing a Career

Spike Lee chose to pull on our heartstrings with the tragic events as a result of Hurricane Katrina in his film *When the Levees Broke*. This was Lee's choice and one that HBO supported. However, Teachers College, Columbia University's releasing of the curriculum *Teaching the Levees* was done to advance the careers of academic elitists at the expense of those who died as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Producing lessons about Katrina and trying to educate the public about the geography and historical aspects of south Louisiana is fine, but to produce as the curriculum writers themselves describe as lessons about race, racism and class is too myopic or nearsighted. Margaret Smith Crocco and her co-writers may have piggybacked onto Lee's one-sided slant of Katrina to advance their careers with another publication.

Teaching The Levees, as Crocco admits, was geared to high school and adult learners to discuss racism in the United States (Teachers College, 2007). The curriculum guide is divided into nine chapters, which range from an overview about New Orleans to issues of being a citizen to economics and geography. Crocco further admits that watching all four hours of Lee's film is unrealistic, but that the curriculum is meant to be a conversation starter for teachers. In the geography section three lessons are presented: "Land Use Patterns and the Future: To Rebuild or Not to Rebuild;" "We heard a Boom: The Levees as a Symbol of Protection, Neglect, and Conspiracy;" and "I Want to Go Home! Refugees in the United States." These three lessons attempt to bring geography to the forefront, but as chapter seven and on page 85, one has to look for these lessons. The first lesson deals with human-environment interactions and the decision to build homes below sea level.

A map of the flooding of New Orleans was used to emphasize the fact that eighty percent of New Orleans is below sea level. Students are challenged to think about the rebuilding of New Orleans and what it would take to protect the residents. This leads into the second lesson, which deals with the levee system and protection. The authors of the second lesson are caught up in the spin that Lee portrayed in his film by playing on the idea that there was a conspiracy to blow up the levees "Does the documentary lend credibility to this belief?" (Teachers College, 2007). The third and final lesson has the student discuss the term refugee and what it means. Again, the authors of this lesson follow Lee's lead and have the students write their reaction to the term used in different quotes before and after watching the film. All three lessons reference both the National Council for the Social Studies standards as well as the National Geography Standards.

While Crocco is the editor of *Teaching The Levees* curriculum not a single writer of the materials was from Louisiana. Crocco did have an advisory board for the curriculum and this included five individuals that live and work in Louisiana. Crocco, like Lee, depended on the work of others to compile her work. Many content experts from Louisiana, Mississippi or New Orleans could have been invited to participate in this project. But as Crocco states, this project *had* to be done because of the “artfully illuminated” issues raised by Spike Lee and his film (Teachers College, 2007). Greg MacGillivray, who utilized two native Louisianans Tab Benoit and Amanda Shaw to weave a wetlands destruction story, contrasts this. While MacGillivray may have had two native Louisianans star in his film, he did not have a major university create a wetlands curriculum with his film. However, the United States Protection Agency does have a *Wetlands Education* curriculum that includes resources, teaching tools and video links. In the state of Louisiana the LSU Ag Center has a curriculum for wetlands education, as does America’s Wetland.

6. Conclusion

In the spring of 2007, the National Council for the Social Studies in a split decision by the members of its Board of Directors endorsed the curriculum *Teaching The Levees*, a guide for the Spike Lee film *When the Levees Broke*. As a result, this curriculum and film were sent free of charge to the 22,000 members of NCSS to be used in the classroom. As a member of the NCSS Board of Directors at that time, I argued that the film and curriculum guide were inappropriate for the high school level and misrepresented Louisiana, its culture and struggle with coastal erosion. Other board members agreed with my arguments and supported me in voting no for the endorsement, but we were out voted. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina affected thousands of individuals, and former residents of New Orleans can be found in every state of the Union. The National Council for the Social Studies could have promoted Louisiana and its coastal problems in a better way. However, NCSS chose not to do so and instead helped advance the career of university professors at Teachers College, Columbia University. Wetlands serve as the natural barrier for hurricanes, and teaching about the geography of Louisiana is a challenge. Mainstream films such as *When the Levees Broke* paint a one sided and human-interest aspect of Hurricane Katrina. While *Hurricane on the Bayou* was produced for commercial use like *When the Levees Broke*, as a curriculum writer, presenter and teacher of geography, I can use *Hurricane on the Bayou* to teach about Louisiana Geography. Clearly Louisiana is misrepresented in Spike Lee’s film *When the Levees Broke*.

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